DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 285 829 SO 018 432

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TITLE Improving Writing Skills through Social Studies. ERIC Digest No. 40.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, Bloomington, IN.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jul 87
GRANT 400-86-0020
NOTE 4p.
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education, 2805 East Tenth Street, Suite 120, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana 47405.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Content Area Writing; Creative Teaching; Learning Strategies; Secondary Education; *Social Studies; Teaching Methods; Writing Improvement; *Writing Processes; *Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

A recent study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) directly links writing effectiveness to development of skills in critical thinking. This ERIC Digest discusses: (1) recent research on the linkage between writing and learning; (2) successful approaches to teaching writing; and (3) suggestions for including an effective writing component in the social studies curriculum. Research indicates that writing enhances learning in several ways: (1) writing requires knowledge and focuses thought; (2) writing enhances critical thinking; and (3) writing shifts responsibility for learning to the student. Of the two most frequently used approaches to teaching writing, one emphasizing the product and the other emphasizing the process, the product approach is the most accepted but the process approach is rapidly gaining adherents. The process approach indicates an awareness of the linkage between writing, thinking, and learning. The NAEP study found that students who used elements of process writing (planning, revising, and editing) are more likely to be better writers. For social studies teachers, the best approach appears to be a blend of the process and product approach. The most effective method of using writing to enhance learning and encourage creative and critical thinking appears to be the development and use of writing assignments that stimulate and challenge students. The NAEP study also found that students who write more, write better. This finding coupled with evidence that critical thinking and higher order intellectual skills are nurtured by appropriate writing assignments makes a powerful case for increasing the amount of student writing in social studies. A list of resources for teaching writing in social studies is included. (SM)

ED285829

IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES

ERIC DIGEST NO. 40

by

C. Frederick Risinger

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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ERIC Digest No. 40 July 1987

IMPROVING WRITING SKILLS THROUGH SOCIAL STUDIES

by C. Frederick Risinger

One of the more important aspects of recent educational reform efforts is increased attention to writing skills. Much of the current emphasis goes beyond the language arts curriculum into other content areas such as math, science, and the social studies. *THE WRITING REPORT CARD: WRITING ACHIEVEMENT IN AMERICAN SCHOOLS*, a recent study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), directly links writing effectiveness to development of skills in critical thinking. Furthermore, the NAEP study reports that only about one-fifth of students write adequately and most students have "difficulty organizing their thoughts coherently in writing" and "cannot express themselves well enough to ensure that their writing will accomplish the intended purpose" (Applebee, Langer, and Mullis 1986, 11).

This ERIC Digest discusses (1) recent research on the linkage between writing and learning, (2) successful approaches to teaching writing, (3) and suggestions for including an effective writing component in the social studies curriculum.

How is writing linked to learning? Research indicates that writing enhances learning, in several ways.

- *Writing requires knowledge and focuses thought.* In order to write, students must have something to say. Therefore, students must acquire and present content (facts, generalizations, and concepts) when they write a social studies assignment or test response. However, students do not merely *express* knowledge by writing, they also *discover* knowledge. Writing is inherently an integrative process, combining the total intellectual capacities of the writer.
- *Writing enhances critical thinking.* Social studies educators recognize that higher-order thinking skills should be at the heart of our curriculum design and instructional strategies. A recently developed curriculum proficiency guide states, "The primary goal of social studies education . . . should be to help students develop the ability to make well-informed, well-reasoned decisions, and to act responsibly. Responsible decision-making requires practicing the skills of acquiring, evaluating, and using information for the purpose of identifying courses of action and predicting their possible consequences" (Indiana Department of Education 1987, 4). Lessons that emphasize writing can contribute significantly to achievement of this goal.
- *Writing shifts the responsibility for learning away from the teacher and toward the student.* Ability to write empowers students with a sense of efficacy and achievement. A written essay belongs only to the writer, not another student or the teacher. More importantly, writing encourages personal learning. Properly designed writing assignments require students to not only collect knowledge; but to determine which knowledge to retain, which to discard, and how to present it. Such choices may reveal as much about what students do not know (about the subject) as they do about what the students do know. However, this can serve as an excellent diagnostic tool for the teacher. Writing leads to more questions and to the discovery of connections between events, people, and ideas.

Clearly then, there is much to be gained emphasizing more writing in the social studies classroom. The NAEP report indicates that social studies teachers use writing assignments more often than their science colleagues, but that the assignments are frequently short, one-sentence or even one-word responses. In many cases, these assignments are written in a teacher-prepared study guide or workbook. The use of writing assignments declines dramatically at the high school level, the years when acquisition and practice of higher-order thinking skills should receive most attention.

What approaches to the teaching of writing in the social studies offer the most promise? One of the most hotly debated current issues on the teaching of writing is whether to (1) focus on the finished product (the written essay) or (2) emphasize the process of writing with less attention to the final product. According to recent surveys of English/language arts teachers, the most accepted approach remains a focus on the product, the student essay. However, the process approach is rapidly gaining adherents and is the philosophical base for many of the writing workshops being held across the country for both language arts and other content area teachers. Social studies teachers who use the process approach generally applaud the results. However, since mastery of content is frequently the primary goal for writing assignments, the finished product approach still dominates in social studies and the other content areas.

For language arts teachers, emphasis on the more traditional approach means mastery of mechanical knowledge and skills. The content is either irrelevant or secondary to correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other aspects of composition. Though content becomes paramount, many social studies teachers feel obligated to evaluate the mechanics as well. As a minimal standard, students must demonstrate that they have acquired the appropriate factual information and can present it effectively. Teachers who emphasize creative and critical thinking frequently use assignments requiring students to compare and contrast, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate some aspect of the social studies content. Still, even for these teachers, writing is considered a product of learning, not a primary means of learning.

The process approach does not ignore the final written product because it is still used as a measure of student achievement. But using the process approach, particularly in the content areas such as social studies, indicates an awareness of the linkage between writing, thinking, and learning. Barry Beyer, a leading proponent of the process approach, describes the connections this way: "Writing produces both visible thought and a record of how we arrived at that thought. It yields a document that enables us to see what we know . . . The process of writing actually ends in a product which helps us refine our thinking and create new learning" (Beyer 1982, 100).

The use of writing as a way of learning is based on research dating back to the early 1970s that examined the common steps and procedures that successful writers used. While these steps

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vary in number and are given different names by different researchers, they generally break down into four or five steps.

- *The prewriting stage:* Considered the most crucial by many specialists, this stage includes individual or group brainstorming to select a topic, identifying any particular needs of the audience, gathering information, determining the most appropriate purpose and style, and developing an outline or tentative plan.
- *The drafting or actual writing stage:* The student begins to write knowing that he or she is producing a tentative product, one that will require assessment and revision.
- *The revising stage:* This stage and the previous one begin almost simultaneously. Students are encouraged to evaluate as they write and begin to make changes in both content and structure. The use of word processing equipment encourages the process approach to writing.
- *The editing stage:* After a draft of the writing assignment is produced, students review the document in light of decisions made during the prewriting stage. Form and structure become more important than content. Some advocates of the process approach recommend that students work together in groups at this point. Others give the classroom teacher a larger role in assisting the student in evaluating whether or not the content, style, and related goals have been met.
- *The publishing or presentation stage:* The student presents a final copy of what has been written to the intended audience.

Which of these approaches works best? The NAEP study did not find significant differences between the essays written by students in classes where the teachers used the process approach and those who simply made the assignment and waited for the student to turn it in. However, the study did find that students who used elements of process writing (planning, revising, and editing) are more likely to be better writers. The report's final recommendations call for writing instruction throughout the curriculum and the training of students in the use and understanding of the process approach.

For social studies teachers, the best approach appears to be a blend of the two approaches. The process approach seems to increase the amount of student writing and improvements in style and form. Additionally, students are more likely to acquire higher-order thinking skills. However, a tangible goal of student writing in the social studies is to demonstrate knowledge acquisition and understanding of individuals, issues, themes, and concepts in history and the social sciences. Social studies teachers who regularly use written assignments provide their students with broader opportunities for acquisition of knowledge, intellectual growth, and personal satisfaction.

How can writing be included effectively in the social studies curriculum? The most effective method of using writing to both enhance learning and encourage creative and critical thinking appears to be the development and use of writing assignments that stimulate and challenge students. Four categories of assignments can be identified.

- *Reporting:* Students are directed to compile information with a minimum of critical or original thinking. Example—"Write a report on the outbreak and major events of the Spanish-American War."
- *Exposition:* Students are asked to explain an idea, conduct a critical investigation, synthesize issues, or bring a fresh point of view to a problem. Example—"Write an essay to compare and contrast the views of U.S. citizens who wanted to annex the Philippines in 1898 and those who opposed annexation."
- *Narration:* Students are asked to tell a story, an anecdote, tall tale, legend, short story, drama, or vignette. Example—"Pretend you are a soldier with Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders. Write an article for your hometown newspaper about the charge up San Juan Hill that combines some fiction with actual facts about the battle."
- *Argumentation:* Students are asked to evaluate, defend, or attack an idea or belief. Example—"After reading the speech by Senator Beveridge of Indiana supporting the annexation of the Philippines, write a speech supporting or attacking his position. Support your arguments."

The recent NAEP study shows that students who write more, write better. Students who reported writing three or more reports and essays during a six-week period had higher achievement levels than students who reported doing no writing during that period. This finding, coupled with evidence that critical thinking and higher-order intellectual skills are nutured by appropriate writing assignments, makes a powerful case for increasing the amount of student writing in the social studies. Development of a systematic approach to enhancing learning through writing in the social studies is likely to benefit all of us—students, teachers, and the society.

References and ERIC Resources Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare this Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (Current Index to Journals in Education) which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries, using the bibliographic information provided below.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract no. 400-86-0020. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.